DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 443 PS 026 642

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TITLE	Exploratory Programs in Alabama Middle Grades Schools.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	11p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Discovery Learning; *Discovery Processes; Early Adolescents; Grade 6; Grade 7; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Learning Activities; *Middle Schools
IDENTIFIERS	Alabama; Exploration; *Exploratory Studies; Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

Many educators believe that middle grades schools have a responsibility to capitalize on the natural curiosity of young adolescents through the use of an exploratory curriculum to help students understand the world in which they live. This study examined the status of middle grades exploratory programs in Alabama. A 22-item questionnaire was sent to the 178 Alabama schools enrolling sixth or seventh graders; 43 questionnaires were returned. Findings indicated that 77 percent of respondents had some sort of exploratory program, with exploratory courses such as art or computers the most common. Nine percent of schools each offered elective mini-courses such as personal finance or integrated exploratory activities into the curriculum. The most influential factors behind including exploratory programs were the Boards of Education, middle level education literature, the superintendent, and the school principal, with many schools indicating that more than one constituency influenced the decision to include exploratory activities. Factors influencing curriculum success were adequate staff development, faculty witnessing exploratory programming in daily operation, and staff involvement. Seventy-three percent of schools required exploratory classes although about 40 percent allowed students to select exploratory courses. Only 18 percent of schools provided the opportunity to extend learning beyond the immediate classroom. The attitude of those involved in exploratory programming was overwhelmingly favorable. Major problems identified included scheduling, lack of course variety, personnel, facilities, student apathy, lack of sufficient funding, meeting state mandates, and lack of resources. (KB)

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Exploratory Programs in Alabama Middle Grades Schools

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Young adolescents have a genuine desire to explore their surroundings because of their natural curiosity. In many ways, young adolescents are frequently making new discoveries about themselves and their interests. The middle grades school should capitalize on these new-found interests of its students through its curriculum. Many educators believe the middle grades curriculum has a responsibility to "tap" into this natural curiosity and help students understand the world in which they are living. Exploratory curriculum is an excellent vehicle for addressing this goal.

Exploration opportunities in the curriculum is not a new idea for middle grades schools. In the 1920's the National Education's Department of Superintendents listed fifteen purposes of the junior high-school. The first purpose listed was to meet individual differences in students, while the second was prevocational training and exploration (Van Til, Vars, & Lounsburg, 1967). As the middle school concept evolved, the exploratory programs were considered an essential component. However, their exact role in the middle school has been and continues to be defined and redefined. Many educators still see exploration as a limited responsibility of special courses so labeled (Compton & Hawn, 1993). However, a current movement within the middle level school is a fully integrated curriculum, including exploratory programming.

There are currently three popular models of exploratory programs that can exist in the middle grades curriculum. These three exploratory program models are: 1) The traditional exploratory courses (e. g., art, music, computers); 2) The elective mini-courses (e. g., personal finance, folktales, endangered species); 3) The integration of exploratory opportunities within the core curriculum (e. g., the topic of civil rights and how it relates to math, science, social studies, language arts, music, and art).

The purpose of this research study was to examine the status of exploratory programs in the middle level schools in Alabama. The authors believed it valuable to ascertain both the nature and extent of exploratory opportunities currently offered in Alabama's middle level schools. This article describes the outcome of that research effort.

The Sample

A 22-item questionnaire was mailed to all schools that enrolled sixth and/or seventh graders in Alabama as identified by their grade span in the 1996-97 Alabama Public Education Directory. The sample size was 178 with a return of 43. The data from each questionnaire were collated and reported in various categories.

The Results

The majority of schools (58%) reporting contain grades six through eight with the student population ranging from a low of 230 to a high of 1032. Seventy seven percent of the respondents said they have some sort of exploratory program in place, while twenty three percent indicated they had no such program. Table 1 identifies the percent and type of exploratory programming within the respondent schools, with the traditional exploratory course offerings clearly the predominant type.

TABLE 1

PERCENT AND TYPE OF EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS*

Description	Traditional Exploratory Courses	Elective Mini-Courses	Exploratory Activities Integrated	Other
TOTAL	79%	9%	9%	18%

* Some schools have multiple types of exploratory programs.

The majority of schools (87%) reporting indicate that some type of exploratory programming has been a part of the school curriculum for more than three years. The most

influential factors for including an exploratory program in the school curriculum are reported in Table 2. The predominant reasons include Board of Education, middle level education literature, the superintendent and the principal of the school. Many schools reported multiple responses to this question, indicating that more than one constituency influenced the decision to include such activities in the overall program.

TABLE 2

FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPLORATORY PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT*

Factors	State Mandate	Board of Education	Superintendent & Central Office Faculty	Faculty	Students	Parents	Middle Level Education Literature	Principal
TOTAL	9%	18%	27%	15%	9%	12%	27%	33%

* Multiple responses possible

An important factor influencing success in exploratory curriculum is the degree to which faculty receive adequate staff development training, as well as witness actual exploratory programming in day-to-day operation. In 76% of the schools reporting, faculty experienced exploratory programs in other schools first hand. Additionally, 82% of the schools reported that faculty had attended workshops, presentations, or conferences in the past two years which dealt with exploratory programs.

Staff involvolvement in exploratory programming is another factor critical to success. Only 21% of the schools reported that all staff were actively involved in the exploratory curriculum. Forty-five percent of the reporting schools indicated that they had specific teachers hired to teach the exploratory classes.

In 73% of the schools, exploratory classes were a required component of each school's curriculum. Interestingly, 50% of the schools indicated that its staff enjoyed the option to select

which exploratory course they wished to teach. On the other hand, 42% of the schools allowed students to select which exploratory course experiences they wished to participate in. In 36% of the schools, exploratory classes tend to have average enrollments of 25 students.

In light of the movement toward integrating the concept of exploration into the entire curricular offerings of the middle grades school, it is interesting that 60% of the schools reported that exploratory programming occurs throughout the entire school day, five days per week. As shown in Table 3, the number of weeks per year in which such programming is offered runs from three to more than eighteen. The number of minutes per day during which exploratory programming is scheduled ranges from approximately 40 minutes per session to more than 90 minutes. Fifty minutes per session (82%) appears to be the norm, however.

TABLE 3

EXPLORATORY PROGRAM SCHEDULING WEEKS PER YEAR

Number of Weeks	0-2	3-6	7-9	10-18	18+
TOTAL	0	12%	30%	21%	45%

An important component of any exploratory experience is the opportunity to extend such learning beyond the immediate classroom and/or he regularly scheduled exploratory time. In 18% of the schools, teachers and students enjoy the option to do this, while 82% of the schools do not have the opportunity to extend exploratory program activities beyond the regularly scheduled classroom time. Another important aspect of exploratory programming is evaluating the experience. Table 4 reports the number and type of evaluation used in schools included in the survey. The "numerical average" predominates.

TABLE 4

EVAULATING STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS

Description	Numerical Average	Letter Grade	Satisfactory/ Unsatisfactory	Complete/ Incomplete
TOTAL	58%	27%	9%	.06

In view of the literature supporting such programming, we are happy to report that exploratory programming is a primary function of the middle school. Even though most of these schools contain "traditional exploratory course based programs" there is a clear commitment to the concept of exploration and its relationship to early adolescence. And, as one might expect, the attitude of those involved in exploratory programming (e. g. students, staff, parents, and the general public) is overwhelmingly favorable (79%).

Major problems challenging the development and implementation of exploratory programs include scheduling, lack of variety of course offerings, personnel, facilities, student apathy, lack of sufficient funding, meeting state mandates, and finally, lack of resources. In spite of these constraints, most of the reported Alabama middle grades schools make a concerted effort to provide some exploratory curriculum to students.

Conclusions

The picture of exploratory programs as painted by the data reveals a rather variegated educational landscape. Clearly, there exists in the state wide distinctions as to what constitutes good exploratory curriculum. That the return of surveys was so low is disappointing, goes without saying. One may conclude, we think legitimately, this means that a not insubstantial number of Alabama Middle Schools do not have an Exploratory Program Among the conclusions one may draw from the extant data is that Alabama's middle level schools continue to offer, with

the greatest frequency, traditional exploratory programs.

These exploratory programs, with an average number or 25 students and an average length of 50 minutes daily, are typically taught throughout the day. The majority of exploratory classes is taught by specifically hired exploratory teachers and last from three to nine weeks. Most exploratory teachers are not able to select which classes they will teach while the majority of students are able to select which exploratory classes they will take. It appears that students' and faculty's interests, along with state mandates supported by middle grades educational literature, has the greatest influence in regard to including an exploratory program in middle level schools. However, an overwhelming majority of the reporting middle grades faculties have made the effort to improve their school's exploratory program by attending workshops, presentations, and visiting other schools with successful exploratory programs.

Based on the data gathered for this study, it appears that middle level schools in Alabama define and recognize exploratory classes when they can be classified as separate classes (e. g., band, art, foreign language). These separate exploratory classes are often viewed as requiring special facilities, specialized teachers for subject matter knowledge, and special grouping to facilitate the experience.

However, while it is important to continue to offer these separate exploratory classes, middle grades schools need to continue to place more emphasis on integrating exploration within the core curriculum. Teachers should tap into young adolescents' natural curiosity to explore within the curriculum. For example topics such as music, art, and foreign language could be studied and explored within content courses such as social studies (Allen & Stevens, 1997). If students show a special interest in jazz while studying the Roaring Twenties, then the students should be encouraged to explore and study the topic in greater detail. "If exploration is a valid

concept, then we must be concerned that ALL Aspects of the middle school are exploratory. Given the state of curriculum planning in middle level schools, it is obvious that this expanded vision of what exploration can be does not yet exist" (Brazee, 1987).

Exploratory programs are very important for the young adolescent and should be encouraged within middle level schools. According to this study, the middle level schools in Alabama continue to implement and improve an exploratory program which is important to the success of a middle school. The information gathered in this study should provide a base to compare future studies on exploratory programs in middle grades schools, not only in Alabama, but in other southern states as well (Allen & Warren, 1994, 1994a, 1996).

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